

# **SOPHISTICATED GEOGRAPHIES**

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## **Sophisticated geographies**

### **Abstract**

This paper offers a reflection on the relevance of Nietzsche to recent geographical scholarship. It starts by questioning the more general relationship between geography and philosophy/theory and interrogates what we might mean by theoretically sophisticated geographies. Drawing on a specific context - the postcolonial apology in contemporary Australia – the paper turns to the relevance of Nietzsche’s thinking about morality, in charting everyday moral geographies and imagining more ethical futures.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, reconciliation, postcolonial, Australia

‘how then did that other “gloomy thing”, the consciousness of guilt, the entire “bad conscience” come into the world?” Friedrich Nietzsche 1887 *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay ‘Guilt, bad conscience and related matters’.

I write this paper as a geographer. I take that positioning to be both an acutely important and utterly relevant caveat to an essay such as this, written (as it initially was) in response to an invitation to think upon the lines of engagement between my own geographical scholarship and the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche. I am not a philosopher. I do not call the way I think ‘philosophising’. My work practices – how I do research – have little in common with how most philosophers go about their work of producing knowledge. Nor do I imagine, or yearn for, the destination of my work to be ‘philosophy’.<sup>i</sup> It is unfashionable in these inter-disciplinary times to set down boundaries such as this. In doing so I am not implying a disinterest in philosophical questions, nor a wish to turn my back on what nowadays we often dub ‘theory’. On the contrary, my research enthusiastically engages with a number of philosophical thinkers, one of which has been Nietzsche. But I am acknowledging that my engagement with Nietzsche occurred under very specific circumstances, the most important of which was delivered by the phenomenon I and my co-author in that work, Haydie Gooder, were trying to understand: the controversy over an apology being given to Australian Aborigines. That apology was called for by Aborigines seeking recognition and reparation for the sense of loss caused by the forced removal of children from their families, what was dubbed ‘the stolen generation’ (Gooder and Jacobs, 2000). Many non-Aboriginal Australians, including Prime Minister John Howard, resisted (even resented) the call for an apology and the emergence of what a so-called ‘black armband history’ of the nation upon which it was predicated. But other Australians faced the revelations about the past of the nation and welcomed the opportunity to say sorry. The national strategy for dealing with this heady mix of injury, bad conscience, resentment, memory work and reparation, was reconciliation. As I will explicate below, the nature of that process took us to one small contribution in Nietzsche’s wider thinking on morality, this being his treatise entitled: ‘guilt, bad

conscience and related matters', originally published as part of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), hereafter *GM*.

Because I am not a philosopher what we did then and what I may, in the future, 'do' with Nietzsche has not a great deal to do with the agendas that enliven the circumscribed territory of philosophy. Indeed, our limited engagement with Nietzsche may very well be judged 'bad' by the ideals and aspirations of philosophers. Recognising such a difference is not done in order to legitimate geography turning its back upon the philosophical ideas of others, nor as a defensive deference, in which it is assumed that only philosophy can philosophise. Rather, it is done to underline the importance of geography itself. Nietzsche came into our research because what he had to say about his philosophical predecessors was relevant to the features of a geographically and historically specific postcolonial dilemma. Of course, Nietzsche does not magically become part of the mix of accounting for certain processes in postcolonial Australia: he is connected to this geographical moment by myself and my collaborator who, at that time, were living and working in that postcolonial context. And he came to us as scholars by way of traceable pathways of reading and living networks of colleagues who were themselves finding new relevance for Nietzsche. I am, then, putting geography first in my account of 'why Nietzsche?' (O'Hara, 1981). To do so is, in my view, part of a wider ethic of scholarship. I am sceptical of geographies in which observations about the world are unconvincingly (indifferently) attached to 'big name' theory. I shy away from geographies in which the exegesis of the ideas of the latest 'big name' theorist seems only interested in drawing us in as rapturous converts or leaving us behind as lost souls. For me the question of 'why any philosopher?' is always also a question of whether or not it produces more sophisticated geographies.

My choice of the adjective 'sophisticated' is deliberate for it captures the ambiguous effects I know to be produced among many of my colleagues by geographies that are self-consciously in conversation with philosophers (like, say, Nietzsche). The word 'sophisticated' has come to have a common use meaning as something that is worldly-wise, not naïve, complex, clever. Etymologically the word derives from the ancient Greek term 'sophic' (pertaining to knowledge) and to that earliest of scholar, the 'sophist' (one who was engaged in the pursuit and communication of knowledge). A common dictionary definition of the term 'sophistication' still carries such a positive sense. But the term 'sophistication' tilts

also in another direction, towards the less positive notion of sophistry. Sophistry is the process of investing knowledge with fallacious or misleading argument. This negative meaning of ‘sophistication’ is itself derived from philosophy and, specifically, from the negative interpretation first Plato and then Aristotle gave to the project of the early sophists. Among other things the early sophists were teachers who, for a substantial fee, provided training in speaking persuasively.<sup>ii</sup> As Susan Jarratt (1991, xv) notes, their credentials in teaching the art of rhetoric derived in part from their experiences of different cultures: ‘they believed and taught that notions of “truth” had to be adjusted to fit the ways of a particular audience in a certain time and with a certain set of beliefs and laws’. This model of knowledge was antithetical to the Aristotelian belief in wisdom as pertaining to permanent truths, and justified his division of rhetoric from the pursuit of other more probable or certain knowledges. The sophist’s knowledge (rhetoric) was adulterated, disingenuously altered, a perversion and it stood in sharp relief to philosophy. Barbara Cassin (2000, 105) has referred to this as the process by which philosophy itself made the sophists into its negative alter ego, its ‘bad Other’.

Nowadays, the sophist’s sensitivity to difference would not necessarily result in their project being so negatively construed. Indeed, Jarratt’s own positively inflected reclamation of the sophists turns upon the fact that they were ‘skeptical about a divine source of knowledge or value’ and instead sensitive to knowledge as formed ‘in historically and geographically specific contexts’ (xx). One way of thinking about this is to say that the ancient sophists were both *geographers* and *philosophers*. Although it is also to admit that it was their geography – their emphasis on the situatedness of knowledge – that was their undoing in relation to later developments in philosophical thought. This arrangement stands in contrast to that we see in many contemporary geographies, in which it is their claim to being philosophical that can give rise to a scepticism among some readers. Indeed, when ‘big theory’ touches empirically grounded geographies indifferently or when ‘big theory’ seems to preclude doing empirically grounded geographies altogether, then the claim against such geographies may even be that they are a disingenuous alteration or perversion of the geographical project, a less genuine geography lacking reality or relevance. I might even rephrase the pertinent question as follows: is a sophisticated geography good or evil?

The relationship between good and evil was of course a specific concern for Friedrich Nietzsche, and much of his work was developing a critique of (modern) morality. The Sophist played an important (if fragmentary) part in that emergent critique (see Consigny, 1994, for an overview) and he saw them as both ‘co-workers’ and ‘precursors’ to his own project. In the broad, Nietzsche’s philosophical project was set against what he construed to be the deadening after-effects of Socratic and Platonian thinking and the advocacy of unconditional truths and dogmatic moral rules (Consigny, 1994, 11). Indeed in a replication of sophistical thinking, Nietzsche’s methodology for returning to the Sophists (his ‘genealogy’) admitted partiality and interest (his position). His investigations were always presented as interpretation as opposed to truth and his writings celebrated the creativity of the agonistic, competitive rhetorical episteme within which the Sophists operated. In short, Nietzschean epistemology converged with the sophistic model of knowledge in that it was conditional and anchored in the specificities of situations. So too did his morality. The sophists, like Nietzsche, repudiated objective truth and, in so doing, relinquished the ability and right to discern and articulate dogmatic moral rules on how one ought to behave (Consigny, 1994, 16). Nietzsche read this as an explicit effect of geography. The sophists, he asserted, ‘juxtapose the multiplicity (the geographical relativity) of the moral value of judgments’ (Nietzsche, 1968, 428).

What constitutes a moral geography in a world of difference has been an important thread within recent critical geographical thought (Sayer and Storper, 1997; Proctor and Smith, 1999; Smith 1997, 1998, 2000). In geographical grapplings with the interface between moral philosophy and ethics, the role of geography (understood as a specific place or location) on moral thinking and practice has gathered considerable attention. Smith (2000, 99) calls this the ‘moral force of place’. With a view that carries traces of sophist reasoning, Robert Sack (1997, 8) argues that geography is not only ‘at the foundation of moral judgment’ but also that moral goals ‘must be set and justified by us in places as inhabitants of a world’. As convenient as it might be for geographers to claim a moral geography on the basis of locational specificity alone, other geographical concerns have simultaneously required thinking more relationally and normatively. Indeed the tension between universalism and relativism has had emergent moral geographies navigating their way precariously between the solid rock of ‘universalism’ and the slightly harder place of ‘particularism’ (McDowell, 1995, 292). For example, Sack’s admission of a place-

based morality is tempered by his warning that if place (specificity) is too ‘thick’ in the making of moral frameworks then they would be too partial, and foreclose upon a more transcendent view (Sack 1997, 257). David Smith’s (2000) sustained account of moral geographies grapples further with the fact of particularity and the desire for transcendence, by deciphering a ‘deeply geographical distinction in morality’ between sympathy for the close and familiar (a morality of feeling) and concern for distant and different others (a morality of reason).

This essay does not seek settle a course through this perilous terrain in order to prescribe parameters for the future practice of human geography – a normative morality. Rather it adds to the growing body of scholarship within the discipline on everyday moralities: ‘grounded, contextualized and...concrete’ (Proctor, 1998, 11). Such geographies may be seen as mere descriptive moralities, but they bare immediately upon metaethical themes such as those Nietzsche was grappling with when he harnessed the Sophists to his critique of the tradition of discerning timeless and placeless moral truths. When we wrote our geography of reconciliation in postcolonial Australia our interest lay in charting the situated genealogy of moral claims and their uneven effect. The sophisticated genealogies of morality produced by Nietzsche provided a template and analytical guide for our work. His genealogies exposed the conditions by which moral worlds were made and lived, and charted the co-dependency between the descriptive particularity of moral claims and the universal drives (*interests*) of normative claims.

Nietzsche is often misinterpreted as being against morals, even against ethics. But his performed ‘immorality’ is only ever in relation to the specifics of what stands for morality in his time – what he considers to be a narrow morals. This includes Christianity most obviously. It also incorporates other breeds of modern morality such as the law and concepts of justice – many of which, in the West at least, are derivatives of Christian morality. This variant of morals, Nietzsche argues, restricts the ways in which we imagine ourselves, and ourselves in relation to others. This is why he is interested in the ‘genealogists of morality’, not because he believes them or in their rules and codes (‘they aren’t good for anything’, he says), but because he wants to situate and circumscribe their claims. *On the Genealogy of Morals* was a genealogy of those ‘genealogists’ and his work provided a startling model for a psychology of the priestly class. In Nietzsche’s use of the term ‘genealogy’ we are seeing a critical historicising of the concept of morality in line with a more general



methodology of de-naturalisation, subsequently taken up by Foucault. This is why Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen (2002) translate the title of *On the Genealogy of Morals* to be *On the Genealogy of Morality*, thereby emphasising Nietzsche's interest in the conditions by which 'morality' is produced and maintained and its effects. This was not so much a question of the origins of morality but the *value* of morality and whether they obstruct or promote 'human flourishing' (Nietzsche *GM* 2002).<sup>iii</sup>

'Gloomy' emotional states like guilt and 'bad conscience' come into view for Nietzsche because he believes them to be the outcome of 'morality' or, more precisely, what Brian Leiter (2002) refers to as 'morality in a pejorative sense'. For Nietzsche these are symptomatic emotional states for they demonstrate the constraining hold of modern morality. Guilt, for example, he views as an auxiliary invention, a psychological accessory that secrets away and manages a range of more raw and unrestrained feelings that morality does not want to allow – this is why he interprets it as the 'animal soul turned against itself' (*GM*). Guilt, Nietzsche observes, has its origins in the 'pre-moral' notion of debt and the relationship of obligation established between buyer and seller – a relationship that was elaborated through the violent history of contract law in which suffering (a pound of flesh, say) could stand as a satisfying and satisfactory compensation for a debt not paid. And it is, at this point, important to register that the pleasure of that suffering, is not solely in the hands of the creditor. Through the work of 'bad conscience' the debtor too feels the cruel pleasurable relief of sacrificing, say, that pound of flesh. Such 'bad things' become perverse preordinations of how we should relate, constraining the very terms by which we might act ethically and precluding the emergence of a more properly ethical – because openly relational, contingent and imaginative – world.

### **One moral geography**

Nietzsche's ideas had immense resonance with my colleague, Haydie Gooder, and I in terms of what we were observing of settler-indigenous relations in Australia during the 1990s (Gooder and Jacobs 2000). At that time, Australia was actively engaged a state-sanctioned process for thinking, speaking and enacting settler – Aboriginal relations differently: this was the process of reconciliation. Reconciliation was a political process best understood as expressing something of what Judith Butler (1997) might refer to as a 'psychic life', in this case of a post-colonising national

subjectivity. It included talk about material recompense around dispossession of land, but that material calculation was overtly linked to other calculations about other injuries experienced by Aboriginal society under colonisation. Centrally, it included acknowledging the emotional and cultural damage that was wrought upon Aboriginal communities by the long history of Aboriginal children being taken into institutional care by the state and various church agencies. The history of the 'Stolen Generations' and the cultural and emotional injury it caused Aboriginal society was central to the reworking of settler-indigenous relations at that time.

At the contentious heart of the reconciliation process was the matter of an apology. In 1997 an Inquiry by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families had been released in a report entitled *Bringing Them Home* (Commonwealth of Australia 1997). The Inquiry investigated the painful consequences of the forced removal, in the name of assimilation, of 'half-caste' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and homes. The Inquiry into 'The Stolen Generation' brought into public view a previously hidden part of the nation's history. In one of its many and wide-ranging recommendations, the Inquiry called for those involved in forced removals (governments, churches, police forces and welfare agencies) to apologize to indigenous Australians. Many agencies did apologies, although the Federal Government failed to deliver what indigenous Australians felt to be a properly worded apology. Haydie Gooder and I set about documenting the way in which the failure of the Federal Government to deliver a 'proper' apology brought together large numbers of settler Australians in a collective expression of sympathy towards Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. This is a group we dubbed the 'sorry people'. In the absence of a proper national apology there was a proliferation of 'minor' apologies, an unprecedented outpouring of popular sympathy toward indigenous Australians. Throughout the 1990s, streets were crowded with whites marching to remember the Stolen Generations, people queued to sign sorry books, local organisations held reconciliation football carnivals, and many non-Aboriginal Australians confused by these new revelations about their nation's past voluntarily attended reconciliation workshops where they were re-taught the history of the nation from an indigenous perspective. This pedagogical function is a kind of 'mnemotechnic', a device for assisting the memory, and it somewhat clumsily seeks to replace an unconscious imprint of a nation properly formed, with a

consciousness of the real history of the nation. Such remembering was an essential precursor, for a postcolonial apology requires the offender to 'recall' and be 'mindful' of the past so that he or she might move on to a restored state of being (Tavuchis 1991: 8). For Tavuchis the proper apology 'acknowledge[s] the fact of wrong doing, accept[s] ultimate responsibility, express[es] sincere sorrow and regret, and promise[s] not to repeat the offence' (1991: vii). In this sense, reconciliation asks that the past be revisited in the hope that this process might ordain a new future (Nietzsche 1994: 61). Reconciliation both actively reflects on the past and attempts to achieve mastery over what Nietzsche described as 'the whole somber thing called reflection'. (1994: 62)

Sorry people were, then, settler Australians who, in the face of revelations about Australia's hidden (we might say actively forgotten or repressed) colonial past, came to feel they had lost the Australia they once knew and loved. They assumed not only feelings of guilt but also the mantle of responsibility for assuaging the legitimacy of their national subjectivity being compromised. They begin to experience a form of settler melancholia, an unresolved grief for a lost idea of nation. Judith Butler's adaptation of the Freudian diagnosis of melancholia to understand subjectivity is useful here. She describes the way in which melancholia establishes itself in relation to the loss of an external object or ideal (1997: 179). In melancholia, there is a refusal to break the original attachment to the lost object or ideal and it becomes internalized, drawn into the ego, which absorbs both the love and the rage felt towards the lost object/ideal. This reconfiguration of the 'topography of the ego' results in self-beratement and guilt (a form of narcissism). In this sense, melancholia substitutes 'for an attachment that is broken, gone, or impossible' (Butler 1997: 24). The proliferation of apologies from settler 'sorry people' is a symptom of this melancholic entrapment. Their sense of guilt or 'bad conscience' fuelled their excessive work of sorry saying as they sought to recover an idea of a moral national subjectivity. Gooder and I interpreted this state of melancholic subjection as an important postcolonial moment for through this guilt Aboriginal Australians are relationally empowered. Thinking in Nietzschean terms, settler Australians suddenly see Aboriginal Australians as 'injured creditors', to whom they are indebted. In the eyes of the guilt-afflicted settler it is Aborigines alone who hold the power to end their suffering by, say, accepting their apologies and offering forgiveness.

Our original investigations into this postcolonial reversal held some reservations about the ultimate effect of this inversion. Guided by a Nietzschean method of genealogy, we understood that what we were observing in Australian reconciliation was not simply emotions entering politics, or a joyous postcolonial inversion of settler – Aboriginal relations of duty, but the making and re-making of morality in a specific geographical context. And while the effects of that morality was to relationally empower indigenous Australians vis a vis some guilt-afflicted settlers, it was at the same time – with all its politely restrained concepts of reconciliation and its transactions of apologies and forgiveness – a consolidation, extension and elaboration of the Christian moral codes that had, from first contact, so shaped the nature of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations. It is worth dwelling on what this means in terms of the creative potential of the moral restructuring postcolonial Australians are currently engaged in. As I have indicated, one of the key genealogies charted in *GM* is that of Christian morals. Nietzsche argues that Christian morality emerged among a class of oppressed as a self-interested reaction to, and challenge against, the social and economic domination of the Roman Empire. Through the creation of Christian values the oppressors and their moral world was de-valued. In short, Christianity, he is arguing, is a revaluation of values driven by the *ressentiment* felt by the oppressed to the oppressor and he implies (although this aspect is under-developed) that this was a postcolonial manoeuvre. In comprehending this reversal of fortunes Nietzsche is careful to make clear that transformation comes in the form of re-action, charged by the logics of *ressentiment*.

We have already flagged the memory work that attached itself to reconciliation. And we have also already suggested how the melancholic mood felt by ‘sorry people’ appears to position such guilt-ridden settlers in a relation of deference to the newly acquired power (to forgive) held by indigenous Australians. In short, some of the memory work going on through reconciliation in contemporary Australia is about de-valuing the structure of good and evil held within pre-revisionist histories of the nation. In so doing it is a reaction to the *ressentiment* of indigenous Australians towards colonial pasts. But does this restructuring deliver a joyous postcolonial moment? Reconciliation remains a ‘gloomy thing’ and not just because once empowered settler Australians now feel less legitimate. It is ‘gloomy’ because the moral infrastructure that Aboriginal *ressentiment* has delivered is already held within the very Christian morality that colonialism delivered. The structure of guilt and

forgiveness encapsulated in the apology testifies to this. The drive to create an 'on record' apology is proof of a settler subject actively transforming him or herself from 'colonialist' into that fantasized subject of the postcolonial nation. And, as Tavuchis has noted, individuals and collectives who apologize 'promiscuously and excessively' often lack a sense of 'autonomy' and 'firm social identity' (Tavuchis 1991: 40). Perhaps it is unsurprising that one newspaper inadvertently referred to Sorry Day as 'a national day of atonement' (*The Age* 19 May 1998). Such a slip confirms that standing centre stage of such apologetic re-action was not the sorrow of The Stolen Generation, but the desire of those settler Australians for absolution for past sins.

The reason that Nietzsche embarked on his genealogy of morality was in order to clear away moral orders that he felt prevented the emergence of a more imaginative ethical creativity. We shared that interest and that moral goal when we too set about investigating closely the situated circumstance of Australia's postcolonial moral restructuring. It might well be that the kind of moral world of which reconciliation is a part – structured as it is out of resentment, requiring as it does the internalised bad conscience, and drawing as it then must on a dance of apology and reparation – can only deprive us of the kinds of forces that are needed to cease being reactive and to move beyond colonialism (Deleuze, 1986). Although the process of reconciliation has done much to recognise indigenous experiences of colonialism and to restructure the sentiment of the nation, it cannot herald a more radical relational ethical. That becoming will be forestalled until Australians release themselves from the straightjacket of morality that constrains not only the work we do in the name of postcolonial sentiment, but also the work we do in the name of so-called postcolonial justice.

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<sup>i</sup> For example David Smith has complained that the nexus between moral philosophy and geography is a 'one-way street'. Despite a resurgence of interest in ethics in geography, there is, he noted, 'little evidence that moral philosophers have any interest in or knowledge of the subject-matter or literature of geography' (1997, 584).

<sup>ii</sup> It was the acquiring of fees which has, in some accounts, been offered as evidence of the fact that the sophists wielded knowledge in a self-interested fashion, as opposed to the deploying of knowledge in pursuit of 'higher' goals such as wisdom, virtue, even justice and democracy (Cassin, 2000, 106)

<sup>iii</sup> Although Nietzsche's method of genealogy is said to have been the model for Foucault's non-essentialist, post-origins historico-philosophical method, Leiter (2002, 166-7) has questioned this on the grounds that Nietzsche sought to provide a 'real history of morality'.